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# The myriad ways in which COVID-19 revealed character

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With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders across all sectors and at all levels in societies worldwide have faced enormous challenges — health, social, economical, political, and so forth. Some have been praised for their quick responses to protect citizens; others demonstrated poor judgment and thus have had their leadership questioned. Presumably, in the years to come, the importance of good leadership will be magnified as key decision-makers continue to confront highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations resulting from this crisis.

In the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak, the word "character" has frequently surfaced because a leader's character and how it contributes to decision-making and subsequent action is critical to their ability to allay fear, reduce uncertainty, move people forward, and help facilitate appropriate solutions. Peter Wehner, a senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, wrote about the challenges of presidential leadership, noting that "it's reasonable to expect that a president will face an unexpected crisis — and at that point, the president' s judgment and discernment, his character and leadership ability, will really matter." Comparing American and Canadian executive leadership during the pandemic, Andrew Cohen, a professor at Carleton University, observed, "the prime minister appears in public every day, alone, outside his residence. He speaks sensibly, with authority, without hyperbole. This has been his finest hour. Canadians trust him. They may not have voted for him — only about one-third did — but that doesn't matter now." And Suze Wilson, senior lecturer at Massey University, praised New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership during the crisis and regarded her actions as "a masterclass in crisis leadership" because of her direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathy. It is not a stretch to say that challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic are a test of judgment and character.

We do not suggest that the performance of leaders in crisis situations is solely a function of character. Performance is always determined by competencies, character and commitment to the leadership role. Crucial competencies in crisis situations include planning and execution, personal and organizational crisis readiness, communication, performance assessment, and reflection on possible actions required to make the necessary adjustments. We clearly witnessed the importance of commitment (aspiration, engagement, sacrifice) that so many healthcare professionals displayed in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, in this paper we focus on why fighting COVID-19 required character.

## CHARACTER

The word character is often used in cavalier ways. We adopted the framework developed by Ivey Business School professors Mary Crossan, Gerard Seijts and Jeffrey Gandz to frame our observations. Character is a critical and indispensable component of good leadership because of its relevance to effective decision-making and subsequent action. Character shapes a number of things, including but not limited to: what we notice within the context we are operating; how we interact with the world around

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us; who we engage in conversation and how we conduct those conversations; what we value; how we interpret feedback; what we choose to act upon; how we deal with conflict, disappointment, and setbacks; the goals we set for the organizations we lead; how we communicate; and so forth.

Any crisis exposes both the good and bad in people who find themselves in leadership roles. How leaders respond affects the relationships they have with their followers, including citizens. However, a unique aspect of leader character is that it is linked to an individual's disposition rather than one's position within an organization. As such, COVID-19 revealed things about the citizens of affected nations as well as their leaders. Citizens' singing from open windows, balconies and rooftops, for example, served as a powerful reminder that we as individuals could find creative ways to remain connected as medical experts urged us to remain at least six feet apart. Interconnectedness — to sense and value deep connections with others at all levels within organizations, communities, and society — is an important part of the character dimension of collaboration, while drawing upon optimism and appreciating the beauty of art (e.g., music, painting, or poetry) are part of transcendence. As research by Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania has shown, both transcendence and interconnectedness are related to our subjective well-being and happiness.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how character was revealed — in both positive and negative ways — in the actions that leaders and citizens alike displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe it is of paramount importance to raise awareness of the construct of character and its dimensions — not just to ensure it is brought to the forefront of leadership development in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, but so it can be used by citizens to enrich not only their own lives but those of others.

In the following sections, we explain the critical role of judgment in human agency and how the unique dimensions of leader character — independently and interactively — influence decision-making and subsequent action. We then share several stories to illustrate character and its dimensions in action and showcase their profound impact on individuals, organizations, communities and societies. We end this paper by issuing a challenge for all of us to find ways to develop strength of character in order to make a difference in our organizations, communities, and society-at-large.

## THE CRITICAL ROLE OF JUDGMENT (OR PRACTICAL WISDOM)

The world needs leaders with good judgment, or practical wisdom, to address pressing issues that present themselves in highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous contexts. In their book *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*, Swarthmore College professors Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe defined practical wisdom as "the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time." As Crossan and her colleagues explained in their book *Developing Leadership Character,* judgment has its own set of behaviors that underpin it, but judgment relies also on the ten dimensions that support it. Thus, we need leaders who are able to activate each of the eleven dimensions of character at the right time and in the right amount to guide their decision-making and call forth the right behaviors.

It is easy to envision how each character dimension matters when leaders are presented with unprecedented challenges. For example, imagine how citizens might feel if a leader fails to exhibit humanity while sharing critical, hard-hitting information with the public. If individuals perceive there to be a lack of compassion for, and understanding of their personal hardships, they won't feel a sense of connection to and trust in their leader nor confidence in the measures announced. In such situations, people's anxiety is likely to increase while their resiliency may suffer. Doug Ford, the premier of Ontario, Canada, received praise from all political parties for the way he ran the province's daily press conferences during the present pandemic. Observers noted the deep empathy he conveyed for the public he serves, especially when he delivered the grim message that between 3000 and 15,000 Ontarians might die as a result of the pandemic over the next 18 to 24 months. He brought transparency and candor to his briefings, believing that sometimes knowledge is safer to possess than fear. Ford also combined his messages with humanity thereby hoping to keep trust in government agencies alive — which was a very tall order given the trust deficit that existed in many jurisdictions according to the 2020 Edelman trust barometer.

As Crossan and her colleagues articulated in their research and outreach, truly great leaders demonstrate strength in each of the character dimensions and, coupled with excellent judgment, are able to call upon and deploy the character dimensions to suit any particular situation: (1) transcendence to visualize the needed end state and to remain optimistic while journeying the often long and difficult road to get there; (2) integrity to recognize what needs to be done and to report candidly on the progress to those directly and indirectly impacted by the measures; (3) drive to deliver results despite obstacles, setbacks, and criticism; (4) courage to make tough and often unpopular decisions; (5) humanity to do what needs to be done, all the while caring about and taking steps to assist the many people affected; (6) justice to recognize and issue the support needed by individuals and/or organizations to help mitigate the negative consequences born of a situation outside of their control; (7) humility to learn and actively seek the best practices to lead teams, organizations, communities, cities, and nations through the crisis; (8) temperance to show calm and restraint even under the most dire of situations, especially as emotions, like a virus, tend to be contagious; (9) accountability to the various stakeholders and bearing responsibility for decisions and the subsequent consequences; (10) collaboration with a very large and diverse group of parties to achieve the desired outcome; and, finally, (11) judgment, to bring all these dimensions together into an effective, efficient, and principled process to work through the crisis.

Judgment, obviously, is a complicated dimension. For one, it means leaders have to be situationally aware and demonstrate a heightened appreciation for circumstances that require unique approaches. Furthermore, it requires

the skillful analysis of a complex and complicated situation to grasp the essence of the challenges they are facing, and the employment of logical reasoning to determine the requisite action. For example, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz provided a compelling illustration of this in March, 2020 when he discussed European efforts to head off a paralysis of public health systems. He specifically noted the associated economic damage, "you have to consider carefully when to adopt these measures, because a national economy cannot handle this over too long a period." The challenge that many people observed was that the coronavirus was dominantly a medical attack on the elderly and an economic assault on the younger generations. Therefore, leaders often deal with what academics and design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber coined "wicked problems" — ones that often present themselves in crises — that require both deep insight into the heart of challenging issues and critical thinking about them.

## THE NEED TO LEARN QUICKLY

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis without modern precedent, where typical or even atypical rules did not apply. The situation rapidly evolved continent by continent, country by country, city by city, and hour by hour. Amid the uncertainty and insecurity, the fundamental role of any government was to keep its citizens safe and, hence, dramatic measures were taken — some previously unseen even during times of war. Countriesbanned the entry of non-residents, and even the Canada - U.S. land border was closed to all non-essential travel in order to stem the spread of the virus. Citizens were encouraged to avoid social gatherings and fined if they ignored the directive. And while religious institutions were closed, imams, rabbis, and pastors began live-streaming worship services. Women who were due to give birth during the pandemic explored alternative delivery options, including home births. An increasing number of employees began to work remotely.

It is a truism that, in new and unprecedented situations, conversations are often short on facts and hard science, while long on hunches and opinions. The heated discussions surrounding the efficacy of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine in treating the coronavirus is a case in point. The contrasting views on the effectiveness of wearing face masks in public places was also hotly debated by public health experts, governments, and the public. Two things became abundantly clear during the early days of the pandemic. First, as an international community, we had much to learn about the new strain of coronavirus that altered our lives so quickly. Second, as an interconnected world, this deadly viral intruder exposed the limitations and inefficacy of traditional borders, and thus demanded new and adaptive measures in response.

Renowned leadership expert, former president of the University of Cincinnati, and former professor at the University of Southern California, Warren Bennis was fond of stressing that leadership and learning go hand in hand. Highly effective leaders and teams are eager to learn from their own and others' experiences — both failures as well as successes — to reduce problems, mitigate harm, in a search for creative solutions. Research by professor Bradley Owens at Brigham Young University reveals that it is critically important that leaders embrace humility: they must be reflective and respectful of other people's experiences and ideas, and, most importantly, must adopt a mindset committed to continuous learning. This is particularly important for an extended crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that will be with us for months, perhaps more than a year, not days or weeks.

But for learning to truly occur, leaders need to be willing to step up and take ownership of challenging issues, including setbacks, mistakes, and a lack of progress. This can be extraordinarily difficult for those leaders who are quick to become defensive because they believe that taking accountability for mistakes can be detrimental to perceptions of their leadership. A compelling example of a leader who resisted taking accountability was U.S. President Donald Trump, during one of the many White House press conferences. A journalist asked him about the slow rate of testing for the coronavirus. Instead of sending a "the-buck-stops-here" message, Trump denied taking the missteps that some health experts say aggravated the crisis. He attempted to project an air of competence by insisting his administration — which disbanded the pandemic response team in 2018 — was doing a "great job" dealing with problems left behind by previous administrations. "I don't take responsibility at all," Trump said. "We were given a set of circumstances and we were given rules, regulations and specifications from a different time."

This response didn't sit well with many people as the pandemic was certainly not an unforeseen problem that came out of nowhere. We believe any leader in the public, private, or not-for-profit sector should remember a key lesson embedded in *Dealing with an Angry Public*, the highly popular public relations book written by Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field. They observed that an angry public contributes to an erosion of confidence in our basic institutions. Italian lawmakers provided a nice contrast with the U.S. response. They understood their grave mistake in having downplayed the seriousness of the virus when it was first detected in the northern region of Lombardy. It appeared that, initially, government agencies were very complacent about the outbreak. For example, Milan, the financial capital of Italy, was at the center of a motivational video that was shared by politicians with the slogan "Milan does not stop." The video contains images of people hugging each other, eating in restaurants, and walking in parks. Politicians quickly admitted they made serious errors in judgment. Tough actions followed in rapid succession. In addition,they pleaded with other governments to learn from their mistakes by taking the coronavirus seriously.

As noted in a Brookings Institution commentary by Federica Saini Fasanotti, a non-resident fellow in the Foreign Policy program, Italians soon became aware of the problem and responded by making the huge sacrifices the government requested. "Responsible democracies," Fasanotti wrote, "share information, transparently, with their citizens. They spread knowledge to enable solutions. Such transparency requires courage among political leaders, but is highly precious because it promotes confidence among citizens."

To be effective, individuals in leadership positions must also act with integrity. They need to be truthful and straightforward with themselves and others, while remaining open and honest in relationships and communications, even in the most difficult situations. They must accurately represent to others what they truly believe, and in doing so demonstrate a high personal and professional moral standard. For example, Anthony Fauci, the Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, showed a high degree of integrity when communicating with the American public while testifying at a House hearing on March 12, 2020, shortly after the first COVID-19 death was reported in Washington state. Fauci noted candidly that public health experts didn't even have a good understanding of how widely the virus had spread in the United States. As for testing, he stated: "The system is not really geared to what we need right now. That's a failing. Let's admit it." This testimony required courage in addition to integrity. Candor often involves conflict because it may get rejected and/or foster resentment. Many of us don't like conflict, especially with people higher up in the organizational hierarchy.

Sadly, an example of a negative outcome borne by a professional who demonstrated both integrity and courage is Li Wenliang, the first doctor in China to recognize the pandemic threat. His effort to warn fellow doctors led Chinese authorities to accuse him of making false comments that disturbed the social order. Tragically, because government officials did not heed his early warning, hundreds of Chinese citizens died, including Li himself. Months after his death, he was officially exonerated. The report stated that Li had not disrupted public order, and that he was a professional who had fought bravely and made sacrifices. This tragic episode reinforces an important leadership lesson, namely, to protect the voices from below when the quality of decisions matters. It is critical for any leader to create a culture where individuals feel they can speak up without fear of reprisals. Research conducted by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson has shown that companies with a trusting workplace perform better than firms where there is low psychological safety.

## THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

Countries, communities, governments, organizations, and individuals around the world were forced to rapidly adjust and adapt to the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the virus spread and unleashed its damage on the health and well-being of individuals and the global economy, it became evident that there would be no easy way out for individuals and societies. In large part this is because we live in an increasingly interdependent world in which networks of people and organizations form the basis of economic, scientific, security, and political activity. In his address on the 38th anniversary of the Tibetan national uprising, the Dalai Lama captured the importance of interconnectedness, dialogue, and collaboration, with the following sage advice. "The reality today," he stated while issuing a call for universal responsibility to ensure the future of humankind, "is that we are all interdependent and have to co-exist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue."

Dialogue, of course, can be challenging, especially when parties are more interested in determining who can be blamed. While using loaded terms like "the Wuhan coronavirus" or "the Chinese virus," the Trump administration attacked China's handling of the outbreak, in an attempt — many believed — to draw attention away from its initial downplaying of this crisis. The Chinese, in turn, argued patient zero might be an American. Saudi Arabia blamed its high outbreak numbers on Iran. Iran, in turn, blamed the epidemic on American bioweapon development. South Korea and Japan blamed each other. All this finger pointing made international collaboration difficult when it was needed most.

Mary Crossan and her colleagues have argued that when you are collaborative, you recognize that what happens to someone, somewhere, can affect everyone, anywhere. Leaders who are collaborative value and actively support the development and maintenance of positive relationships among people. The Italians understood this. Instead of smearing China in public, the nation's officials offered support when China was being hit hard by the coronavirus. When the tables turned, and the death toll in Italy dramatically increased, the Italians sought help from the international community. China responded by sending expertise and supplies. Matthew Syed, the author of *Rebel Ideas: The Power of Diverse Thinking*, discussed the research of Wharton professor Adam Grant on givers and takers: people with a giving approach are flourishing in a world of interdependency. The evidence also shows that the most successful givers are strategic, seeking diversity and cutting off selfish people who want to exploit them. The implication seems straightforward — we need more givers than takers for sustainable, long-term success.

The behaviors associated with collaboration are important in and of themselves to facilitate good outcomes. However, the inclination to collaborate creates a conduit of connections to others that support humanity. Demonstrating collegiality and open-mindedness, both aspects of collaboration, can facilitate candor and transparency, which are part of integrity. And being cooperative and demonstrating a sense of interconnectedness tends to support justice, which is especially important when particular groups are negatively affected by a crisis at higher rates. It is reasonable to expect that interconnectedness facilitates fairness and social responsibility, while positively influencing the degree to which leaders (or citizens) take into consideration a wide variety of interests in any situation.

On April 3, 2020, the Trump administration asked 3M to stop exporting medical-grade face masks to Canada and Latin America. Officials at 3M were unhappy with this directive and felit it raised "significant humanitarian implications" that could backfire by causing other countries to retaliate against the U.S. This White House directive was considered by many as a blatant act of unilateralism and a highly unfortunate example of turning on rather than toward each other to deal with a common threat: this devastating pandemic.

Former British prime minister Gordon Brown observed in *The Guardian* that we now live in "a divided, leaderless world" because the rise of populist nationalism has given way to "an aggressive us-versus-them unilateralism." This puts us all at risk by limiting international cooperation at a time when COVID-19 shows no respect for national borders. "It used to be said of the Bourbons that they would never learn by their mistakes," Brown wrote. "Centuries on, national leaders still seem unable to apply or even absorb the hard-earned lesson that crises teach us, from the Sars epidemic and Ebola epidemic to the financial meltdown: that global problems need global, not just local and national, responses."

Unilateralism is the antithesis of interconnectedness and collaboration. As Brown went on to say, if were truly going to make progress in defeating the coronavirus we "need[ed] political leaders in every continent with the courage not just to lead but to work together." Queen Elizabeth understood this when she stressed the importance of remaining united and resolute to overcome the crisis. In a rare speech to the public, she said that, "This time we join with all nations across the globe in a common endeavour, using the great advances of science and our instinctive compassion to heal. We will succeed — and that success will belong to every one of us." But for this to happen, we would need another of the resulting emanations of interconnectedness and collaboration: trust.

As Canada's *Globe and Mail* columnist Andrew Coyne recently wrote, "Of all the ties that connect us, the most valuable and most fragile one is trust: that willingness, indeed, to let down our guard, to work with rather than against one another." As we look to our elected officials, medical professionals, and business leaders to forge a path through this global crisis, trust will play a critical role in the outcome. But that trust, fostered through a sense of interconnectedness, humanity, and justice, will need to be placed not only in our leaders but also our fellow citizens. As Coyne further stated: "A reservoir of trust — respect for leaders, belief in experts, faith in each other — can mobilize individual citizens to meet collective challenges." In Canada, the media observed that unity of purpose brought former political foes at the provincial and federal levels together in ways that Canada had not always seen in past crises. Moreover, Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, explained that collaboration and partnerships between government at all levels (federal, provincial, and municipal) and business is necessary to protect both the physical and economic health of the country.

## HOPE AND OPTIMISM GOING FORWARD

What began as a calamity in Wuhan, China, quickly became a worldwide challenge, and for most people morphed from a vicarious experience into a deeply personal one. The initial response of many citizens worldwide was panic. This led to a frenzied and excessive purchasing of food and other essential items with many stores in many countries being completely cleaned out. However, as resignation slowly set in, people became more conscious of the needs of others when they shopped, by electing to self-isolate or, at least, to carefully assess the need to leave their house.

In addition to many national leaders doing their best to remain calm and goal focused, that is, to show temperance, business leaders also stepped up to the plate. While many local stores, gyms, restaurants, and other small businesses voluntarily closed for the protection of their staff and patrons, large corporations adapted their production lines, provided philanthropic support through their foundations, created programs that supported healthcare workers and/or changed pay structures to provide assistance and relief to employees who experienced negative economic impacts. For example, both GM and Honda contributed to the production of ventilators and other respiratory products; Fanatics MLB, Ralph Lauren, Under Armour and Jockey produced gowns and masks for hospitals; the Jack Ma Foundation donated 1.5 million test kits and 8 million masks to countries in Africa and Latin America; Airbnb provided housing for 100,000 COVID-19 responders around the world, while Hertz provided free rental cars toNew York City healthcare workers; and the NBA, MLB and other sports organizations created programs to financially assist facility workers who were laid off due to stadium closures and the suspension of sports seasons. Through their corporate communications, not only did many of these CEOs detail the measures they felt required urgent action, they often conveyed a sense of transcendence (future-orientation, optimism, purpose). They acknowledged that the measures needed to slow the pace of COVID-19's transmission would have a negative economic impact on their businesses, at least in the short term, but made it clear that "weathering the storm" was the priority. In other words, they focused on the end game: the eradication of the virus coupled with the recovery of individuals, systems, and societies.

The character dimension of transcendence helps us to maintain a future-orientation because it draws upon optimism, creativity, and a sense of purpose. Scholars from fields such as psychology, health, and management agree that optimism is especially important in challenging times; optimistic people believe that not only is change possible, but — more importantly — they are capable of creating it. Within this COVID-19 pandemic, that certainly applied to politicians, business leaders, and scientists who were faced with dire challenges, but it also applied to ordinary citizens as they sought to be individual change agents by doing their part to contribute to the whole. As we endured the sometimes mundane monotony of voluntary isolation, it is with the optimism that we know there will be a tomorrow.

## CALL TO ACTION

We must appreciate that even the most dire situations present opportunities. However, it is essential to reflect on the actions taken as well as to reflect on additional or alternative possiblities while we work through myriad issues — health, social, economic, scientific, political, technological, and so forth — to truly seize those opportunities.

Reflection is a necessity for learning and progress. Years ago, television personality Fred Rogers said: “I’m very concerned that our society is much more interested in information, than wonder; in noise, rather than silence. How do we encourage reflection? Oh my, this is a noisy world.” We therefore end our paper with expressing the hope that individuals reflect on at least two issues. First, at a general level, to consider which behaviors are best left behind in order to progress in today's deeply interconnected world. To put it bluntly, if one community cannot prevent or manage the outbreak of a highly contagious disease then everyone is at risk; we need a coordinated approach to defeat a common threat. Second, to reflect on the importance of character. And, most importantly, consider how each of us can raise the bar in our respective personal and professional lives by working to develop strength of character, striving to make a difference, and contributing to the flourishing of teams, organizations, communities, and societies.

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The quote from Mr. Fred Rogers is taken from a blog posted on The Daily Coach, 2019, October 8; https://thedailycoach.substack.com/p/reflect-with-mr-rogers.

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